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FROM THE SURGEON GENERAL OF THE U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE

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Department of Health and Human Services

Make Driving A Sober Experience

By now, it should be common knowledge that drinking alcoholic beverages and driving a motor vehicle pose a serious danger to the health and safety of everyone involved. Yet, nearly one-half of the nation's traffic fatalities can be blamed on the abuse of alcohol. I don't call alcohol-related crashes "accidents." I think of them as *avoidable collisions*, because, in every case, at least one driver failed to make the sensible and right choice of *not* driving while impaired by drugs.

That's right, by *drugs*. Alcohol *is* a drug, and, like any other drug, it must be used with caution. The effects of alcohol on driving ability have been well documented. Indeed, since the invention of the automobile, it has been recognized that alcoholic beverages impair the skills and dull the senses that safe driving demands. Still, drunken driving has become one of this country's most costly public health problems. What is the price we pay for this terrible and totally unnecessary problem?

First, alcohol-impaired driving crashes are the leading cause of death for young people. We know from our research that young drivers are more likely to be involved in a car accident by the sheer fact of their inexperience behind the wheel. Alcohol only compounds the risks of crashing for young drivers.

Of course, alcohol-related crashes are not restricted to the young. All of us are victimized. If we haven't been in an alcohol-related crash ourselves, we know someone who has. Sadly, current statistics indicate that two out of every three Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash sometime in their lifetime.

We pay a high cost for these crashes in terms of economic loss and human suffering. All of us share the economic costs—lost productivity in the workplace, properety damage, insurance and medical-care costs and legal expenses. But what is the price of the emotional burden that must be borne by families whose lives have been shattered by an alcohol-related crash? If you ask, they will tell you that the price is beyond measure.

It is difficult to state with precision the amount of alcohol or the number of drinks that will make you an unsafe driver. Weight, sex, the amount of food in your stomach, the time you spent drinking—all of these factors influence your reaction to alcohol. If you drink on an empty stomach, for instance, you will feel the effects of alcohol sooner and more intensely than you would after eating a meal.

We do know that driving ability is diminished with each drink you take. In driver performance tests, even those drivers with low levels of alcohol in their systems showed diminished driving ability. Alcohol had impaired their accuracy of steering, braking, speed control, lane tracking, gear changing and judgments of speed and distance. Even the smallest amount of alcohol in the system, as little as one drink, can impair a driver's ability to respond to emergency situations.

So, make the right choice when it comes to drinking and driving. Stay healthy and set a good example for others by always choosing to drive sober. Because alcohol impairs judgment, it is possible that sometime, perhaps in the near future, someone you know will be incapable of making the right choice. That person needs your help. Stop him (or her) before he gets behind the wheel and hurts himself or others. Unlike many other health concerns, the drinking and driving problem is preventable. It's time we made up our minds that the price it exacts is far too high.

For more information on alcohol-related crashes, write to The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Office of Alcohol and State Programs, NTS-21, 400 7th Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590.

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